

## Chris Rickert: Common Core's enemies are another reason to support it



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[WISCONSIN STATE JOURNAL](#) | [CRICKERT@MADISON.COM](mailto:CRICKERT@MADISON.COM)  
| 608-252-6198

There's a pretty good chance Scott Walker doesn't know much about Common Core, the new set of education standards for kindergarten through high school being adopted by states and school districts across the country.

It's not surprising, then, that when his spokesman was asked Tuesday to explain what his boss meant when he said the standards might be too weak, this newspaper got no response. It's likely

that Walker doesn't know what he meant.

He's not alone — a poll recently found that two-thirds of Americans hadn't even heard of Common Core — and that's unfortunate because it leaves the door open for those at the extreme ends of the political spectrum to step into the vacuum.

In May, state tea party groups sent a letter to Walker and the Legislature accusing the Common Core of being all sorts of bad things, including an “educational fraud” and something of a federal takeover of education.

Soon after, Republican state Rep. Dean Knudson authored and got passed a provision in the state budget to study and hold public hearings on the standards and to create a legislative commission to investigate them.

The process for rolling out the core standards has been “terribly flawed,” Knudson said, and this might be what's led to some of the controversy.

“There are many open questions and those questions are coming from across the political spectrum,” he said.

Or at least the very ends of the political spectrum.

Of late, Wisconsin progressives have started making some nasty accusations about the Core, too, including that it will force students to take even more expensive, standardized tests and is something of a corporate takeover of education.

The editor of The Progressive magazine recently penned a piece that offered the former perspective. Tim Slekar offered the latter. He's the new dean of the Edgewood College School

of Education and self-proclaimed debunker of “any ‘media’ that prints stupid comments from education reformers,” according to the liberal education website At the Chalk Face.

“It’s driven by money,” Slekar said of the Common Core. Corporations that sell tests and other curriculum materials “are driving the policies.”

The Core itself is a project of the Council of Chief State School Officers, which represents the states’ appointed and elected state education superintendents, and the democratically elected, politically bipartisan governors of the National Governors Association.

They brought together education experts, teachers and others with the intention — ostensibly, at least — of creating a more rigorous, deeper set of things that students should know by specific grades.

They are supposed to help make American students more competitive with their international counterparts, who in recent years have been eating American kids’ lunch in areas like math.

Common Core is federal only in the sense that the feds — as they did with No Child Left Behind — make federal dollars contingent on states adopting education standards.

“I think in many ways (Common Core is) a very good idea,” said UW-Madison associate education professor Catherine Compton-Lilly, who has studied the language arts half of the standards (the other half is math) and described the Core as a set of benchmarks.

How districts and teachers get children to go about meetings those benchmarks is up to them, she said. “There’s a lot of local control remaining.”

As for the amount of testing, Department of Public Instruction spokesman Patrick Gasper said Common Core requires no more testing and that the only new state tests, in ninth and 10th grades, were added by lawmakers as part of the last state budget.

Testing is “completely” up to the states, according to H. Gary Cook, who directs research at the UW-Madison-based WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment) Consortium.

“Common Core does not mean more testing,” said Adam Gamoran, the former director of the UW-Madison Wisconsin Center for Education Research and now the president of the William T. Grant Foundation.

Cook and Gamoran also rejected the notion that the Core is a huge corporate money maker.

But regardless of the Core’s genesis, the “prevailing view” among education researchers, according to Gamoran, is that the standards are, if not perfect, much better than what most schools use now.

“This is a much more rigorous set of expectations,” Cook said. “When you expect a lot of kids, they really tend to do a lot.”

For example, according to Compton-Lilly, whereas under the old state standards, reading comprehension largely was about being able to regurgitate what an author said, the new standards require students to be able to break down and understand the author’s argument.

Hunt said students also would be taught some concepts a grade or two earlier than they are now.

By all means, study Wisconsin's Common Core, hold public hearings, force Core proponents to defend their positions.

But for us nonexpert guinea pigs to massive, multifaceted, complicated public policy undertakings such as Common Core, a good rule of thumb is that if the far left and the far right don't like it, it's probably not such a bad thing.

## Chris Rickert



Chris Rickert is the metro columnist for the Wisconsin State Journal, where he's got his laser-like perspective trained (mostly) on all things Madison. He is especially engaged by blatant hypocrisy, hot partisan rhetoric, class warfare and ice cream.

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